NEWS AND NOTES OF PLAYS AND PLAYERS

A Little Journey With Cyril Keightley

By Harriette Underhill

Having fully decided to spend Wednesday afternoon at "39 East," the nearest we came to it was West Forty-eighth—the Vanderbilt Theatre, to be exact, and this is how it happened.

Some one inadvertently remarked in our presence that Cyril Keightley never had been interviewed and we immediately resolved to be the first.

Mr. Keightley has been one of our favorites ever since we watched him in "Love Watches" with Billie Burke. As we remember, that wasn't such a very good play, but with Cyril Keightley in a play we never care whether it is a good play or not.

On the stage he seems a charming person, the sort you want the heroine to marry and the sort you don't mind when he turns out to be a thief.

But his never having been interviewed had a sinister look! He might be very difficult! He might even be like Richard Bennett, who if he didn't exactly set the dog on us, at least didn't call him off.

But, no! The ordeal is over! We have interviewed Cyril Keightley and we beg to report that he is quite as charming off the stage as he is on.

We forgot to ask him why he never had been interviewed, but we think we know. It is because he never has time! As for us, we interviewed him on the instalment plan, but as our business happens to be the thing we like best in the world, of course, we didn't mind that.

"A Little Journey" started so long ago that we can't remember what any of the critics said about it, so we didn't feel guilty when we enjoyed it so thoroughly. To us it meant spending two hours in a Pullman train with Cyril Keightley, which is entertainment enough for one afternoon.

But this was not all! After the first act we went back stage and met Mr. Keightley, but we stayed only long enough to convince ourself that he was going to make "a splendid subject" and to extract a promise from him to grant us a real interview after the performance was over.

As a matter of fact, we were afraid if we waited we should miss some of the second act, but when the curtain went up we found it wouldn't really have mattered, because Jim West and Julie were out in the diner, giving all the other passengers a chance to talk over their disgraceful flirtation. Of course, they were merely jealous because they weren't out having dinner with Jim West. So were we.

At any rate, after the performance was over and Julie had promised to marry Jim, just as we knew she would the moment she stepped on the train, we went back to get an interview. Mr. Keightley seemed so uncomfortable with his arm in a sling and all his make-up on that we told him we should wait while he put on his street make-up.

And then, suddenly, we remembered that we had a tea engagement at Rector's, and Mr. Keightley said he would join us over there as soon as he was dressed.

Well, he wasn't dressed very soon, for he had no more than seated himself for a cup of tea than he had to leap away to the Lambs to meet Montagu Love, but he promised to be at the theatre at 7:30. And he was! At last we had an interview and we stayed so long that surely the curtain did not go up 8:30 that night.

We always supposed that Mr. Keightley was an Englishman, but he isn't. He is an Australian and never saw England until he was grown up. And he has lived in Africa, and he speaks the language of all the different tribes! Not all of them fluently, of course, but enough to prevent any of them from eating him.

And he has played in New Zealand, and in his repertoire is one play in the native tongue. Fancy having to learn a whole language just to produce one play! Plenty of actors we could name do not go to that trouble.

"And how did you get to be an actor?" we asked.

"Well, I don't know, exactly. I guess I just wasn't good for anything else."

"Then how did you get to be such a good actor?"

"I don't know that. I don't even know that I am a good actor, though the people over here have been wonderfully kind to me. Do you think I am a good actor?"

"Well," we answered, "we should go to see you in 'East Lynne' and like it. That's how you stand with us."

"East Lynne,'" said Mr. Keightley, musingly. "That was my first play. I was seventeen and playing the lead. We rehearsed it in the morning and played it at night. Nobody knew his lines, and to make matters worse, an irate father came and stole 'Little Willie,' who had been loaned to us by a mother who had aspirations for her offspring.

"Now, all Willie had to do was to lie in his cot and say 'Mamma, mamma!' plaintively. So our business manager volunteered to play the part if we would set up a screen around the cot to conceal the fact that he weighed 200 pounds, and he laughed so that he broke the bed down and knocked over the screen and the people out in front thought it was all a part of the play.

"And in another play, in the awful chaos of the moment, I gave them the wrong cue and we played the third act before the second and then had to play the second act last. They liked that play so well that it stayed two days."

"Now we know why you are such a delightful actor!"

"Why? Because of my early training?"

"No, because of something which no training can ever give you if you haven't it."

And here a hard-hearted call boy said "Fifteen minutes," and we left Mr. Keightley to prepare for his little journey without telling him why.

Piano Used in "Let's Beat It" Has Service Record

The piano which tinkles out the melodies of "Let's Beat It," the show given by the soldiers of the 27th Division at the Century Theatre now, has a unique record of war service. If it had the hnor due it, it would be banded from stem to stern with wound stripes. It is a big upright instrument, captured by O'Ryan's men when they moved into the fighting lines of Flanders last July, and it has travelled with the division over more than a thousand miles of fighting area and three thousand miles across the sea.

In the great drive of March 21, when hordes of Germans swept back the Allies and took Kemmel, they brought with them this instrument of 104 strings and placed it in a ferro-concrete dugout near the little Belgian town of Watteau in the Dickebusch sector, in the lowlands, near the Dickebusch Lake.

On July 9 the 27th Division took over the line comprising the Dickebusch and Steenvorde sectors, and found the piano in its dark dugout. It took practically the entire company to get the instrument out of its hiding place. The piano needed strings, it needed keys and most of all it needed tuning, but in the division there was every kind of musician and mechanic, and two nights later the theatrical troupe, having erected a stage and built scenery at Oudezeele, rang up the cheesecloth curtain on an amazing truly Broadway production.

From Oudezeele the piano was moved to Steenvorde. A performance was to be given in that racked, deserted village, but the Boche sent an early audience, consisting entirely of high explosives and shrapnel, which wrecked the improvised theatre and made it necessary to place the piano in a hospital for repairs. On that occasion the piano received nine wound stripes.

After the New Yorkers had pushed the Germans back from Mount Kemmel and captured Vierstaat Ridge there came a period of rehearsal and the piano was moved to Beauquesne. From Beauquesne it was moved by truck through the desolate Somme area and arrived finally in a woods known as Templeux Le Fosse. Here a number of performances were given before and after the men of the 27th Division broke the Hindenburg line. The theatre was a large stable beneath a hill and its seating capacity was 400 soldiers.

The captured piano was next moved to Joncourt, and after the division had finished its fighting was sent by lorry to Le Mans. During three months it gave entertainments to thousands of soldiers. Throughout all this time, during spare moments, the musicians worked out "Let's Beat It" on the old Boche instrument.

The Innocent Illusions of Bedroom Farceurs

Bedroom farce is a historic and legitimate form of entertainment. There are, however, three kinds of bedroom farce, the French farce, the American farce, and the French farce adapted for an American audience. The latter is a bastard form. It is impossible to make a good French bedroom farce into a good American one; the two spring from opposite sources. The one is the farce of guilt, the other the farce of innocence. Take the guilt out of the French farce and all its poignancy is gone. Put it into the American and it ceases to be funny.

French bedroom farce does not exist on Broadway. Why should it? The witty, unblushing, sincerely amusing form of the Palais Royal is as out of place in America as an Esquimau in the tropics. It deals with subjects the existence of which is recognized in France and denied as far as possible here. The French are not ashamed of their vices; therefore to laugh at them is not degrading. Moreover, they are pragmatists in their comic perceptions. If a thing exists it may be laughed at. It may be tragic or sacred; that does not prevent its also being funny. Consistency, the jewel of the Anglo-Saxons, is one whose value the Latins have never recognized. To adapt a French bedroom farce for American consumption means to emasculate its situations and demotivate its characters. The fun that remains is but the shell of the original. Witness the attenuated mildness of "Sleeping Partners," the burlesque disguise of "Keep It to Yourself."

American bedroom farce is an entirely different matter. A more innocuous form of entertainment it would be difficult to devise. "Up in Mabel's Room" is a good average example: it follows the usual formula. A half dozen people are gathered at a house party on Long Island—we had almost said Long-suffering Island, so overworked has that part of the coast been of late by playwrights seeking ambiguous atmosphere. The opening scene gives us the key to the game; namely, that every member of the party is strictly and voluntarily monogamous. No matter what situations may arise later in or out of Mabel's room, there can never be any doubt in the mind of the audience that every one on the stage is in love with his own wife or husband, or fiancé, as the case may be. This is so obvious we cannot help surprise that the characters should suspect each other so easily. Doubtless they are stupid. Can it also be that their virtue has made them prudes? We hesitate to answer, but the fact remains that the characters in an American bedroom farce are by all odds the most impeccable and the most easily shocked we have ever met!

The main theme of "Up in Mabel's Room" is a rose pink chemise. Now, a chemise partially glimpsed in a dim light may be suggestive, but a chemise bandied about the stage for three acts has the suggestive quality of a football! The play abounds in misunderstanding and dialogue that has a double meaning. But it is never "double entendre." In a French farce one intentionally says something innocent and means something wicked. In an American one unintentionally says something wicked and means something innocent. This is funny but it is not suggestive, any more than the adventures of the football chemise, which are also funny. The interesting point is that the audience really likes this kind of fun much better than the other, although most of them come out still under the illusion of the title and the underclothing thinking it has been naughty and that they are sophisticated dogs to have taken it so well. It is an innocent illusion. Had any one of the characters committed, or even intended committing, the adultery so generously suspected every one's evening would have been spoiled. But the characters never intend anything so disgraceful. As a matter of fact, they never intend anything at all; they are the merest puffballs of the plot. "Up in Mabel's Room," true to type, is a primitive farce of situation. That the locale happens to be a bedroom does not imply immorality any more than a dining room set necessarily connotes a scene of drunkenness.

Broadway Wary of The New Comedian

It took just one night for New York playgoers to decide that Robinson Newbold was funny on the stage, but it took fifteen years for a theatrical manager to recognize the same fact. Newbold became overnight, in "The Royal Vagabond," George M. Cohan's novel opéra comique, an established Broadway comedian. Newbold knows some interesting sidelights on the business of being a comedian.

"A strange comedian is a greater gamble, in a New York production, than a new dramatic star. The experiment has been made time and again. Comedians who have been stock or road favorites have been brought to Broadway by some enterprising manager, only to prove absolute failures. Their comedy was 'cold,' as they say in the classics. The audience simply refused to laugh. And not a few times a whole production has been doomed because the new comedian failed to be funny for Broadway."

According to Newbold, this has happened so many times that managers were forced to doubt their own sense of comedy. Moreover, they had to mistrust the laughter of audiences out of town or in vaudeville theatres.

Therefore he fluctuated between road engagements and musical stock companies. In stock he was particularly successful in Raymond Hitchcock's rôles. Playgoers who had seen the original productions declared that Newbold gave a very good imitation, indeed, of Hitchcock, although at that time Newbold had never seen Hitchcock's work. He was also cast with success in rôles created by DeWolf Hopper, Richard Carl and Clifton Crawford. Newbold followed Crawford in the title rôle of "Her Soldier Boy" on tour and carried Roy Atwell's rôle when "Alone at Last" was sent out of New York. These affiliations with the Messrs. Shubert made him hopeful of a New York chance, and he was duly given it, but not in a comedy rôle. "I came to Broadway in a small straight part last season in 'Fancy Free,'" relates Newbold. "It was a disappointment to me, but I understood the management's point of view. As a matter of fact, I was never overconfident myself that Broadway would accept my comedy.

"So last spring, when 'Fancy Free' closed, I decided that I would give up the New York idea for good and all. I had spent a dozen happy seasons playing good comedy parts in stock and on tour; I preferred this to bits on Broadway." Therefore, Newbold played the summer out in the Aborn Opera Company in Newark—he had been with the organization previously for four years—and at the time of his selection for "The Royal Vagabond" he was contentedly playing with the Society of American Singers at the Park Theatre, with never a desire to come below Columbus Circle.

It was as Ko-Ko in "The Mikado" that Sam Forrest, general stage director for Cohan and Harris, saw Newbold at the Park. He decided to risk launching the new comedian, and events have borne out his judgment.